The Warlord’s Son

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The sun does not rise in Peshawar.

It seeps - an eggwhite smear that brightens the eastern horizon behind a veil of smoke, exhaust and dust. The smoke rises from burning wood, cow patties and old tyres, meagre flames of commerce for kebab shops and bakers, metalsmiths and brick kilns. The worst of the exhaust sputters from buzzing blue swarms of motor rickshaws, three-wheeled terrors that career between horse carts and overloaded buses.

But it was the dust that Najeeb Azam knew best. Like him, it had swirled down from the arid lands of the Khyber and never settled, prowling restlessly in the streets and bazaars as if awaiting a fresh breeze to carry it to some further, better destination.

In the morning it coated his pillow, a faint powder flecked with soot. In the evening he wiped it from his face and coughed grit into a handkerchief, never quite able to flush it from either pores or lungs. Wherever he travelled it went along for the ride, a parasite, a little gift from his adopted home. He was respectful of its mysterious cloaking powers, because things had a way of disappearing in Peshawar - people, ideas, entire political movements. They would be loud and noticeable one day, only to vanish without a trace in the next, and with each new day someone or something else always seemed to have gone missing.

A Peshawar dawn nonetheless had its charms, and Najeeb liked to rise early to savour them. So, on a warm morning in mid-October he stood in the darkness of his small kitchen a half-hour before sunrise, brewing tea while listening to Mansour's horse cart leaving for the bazaar. He knew without looking that the old man stood like a charioteer on a narrow wooden flatbed, reins in hand, pomegranates and tomatoes piled behind him, the baggy folds of his shalwar kameez flowing ghostlike in the pale light. The lonely clip-clip was soothing, yet also a sort of warning, like the ticking of a bomb. It was part of Peshawar's daily countdown to chaos. Soon enough the narrow streets would explode with vehicles, animals and people, beggars and merchants elbow to elbow along the margins as both cried out for rupees.

The loudspeaker of a nearby mosque crackled to life. Najeeb strolled to the living room, and kneeled, lowering his forehead to the rug in prayer. This, too, was a ritual of tranquillity, yet it never seemed quite peaceful enough here.

In the tribal lands of his boyhood the muezzin's cry had been a solitary call, haunting and lovely. He used to pretend the message was for him alone, and to Najeeb there was still no grander expression of power than the words Allahu Akbar, God is Great,

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when carried on a morning breeze across empty countryside. But in Peshawar there were more muezzins than he could count, and their calls became an unruly conversation - one voice trumping another in a war above the rooftops. Cats yowling over turf. Or perhaps Najeeb was turning into an infidel, a worldly backslider. A Kafir, as his father's Pashtun tribesmen would have said. Life never seemed half so holy now as it once had, and in a country where not only a man's calling but also his marriage were generally set in stone by age eighteen, Najeeb was still a work in progress at twenty-seven.

As a boy he'd roamed a wonderland of extremes, a rural princeling at play among bearded turbaned men with rifles slung on their backs, all of whom owed their allegiance to his father. After breakfast he might sprint barefoot through the dew of waist-high poppies, dodging marauding boys from the village with slingshots round their necks. As the sun climbed higher he sought the refuge of high defiles to watch smuggler parades of camels and horses, teatime caravans swaying and clanking through the passes. Then, off to bed on the veranda of his father's hujera, the men's guesthouse, where he gazed up at stars so icy bright that it seemed they might pierce his skull. Pleasantly weary, he stretched on a rope bed, eavesdropping on his father's guests and supplicants - smoky piratical gatherings in the hujera's great room, with hubble-bubble hookahs and high-calibre bandoleers, lulling him to sleep with the streamside murmur of their mutter and growl, and the whine and hum of their radio, beaming news from the great beyond. Occasionally a burst of laughter or angry shout shouldered into his dreams, but by morning there was only him and the muezzin beneath another clear sky.

Yet, that world also had its special cloaking magic. It was a place where one learned quickly to conceal thoughts and dreams, and from his earliest years Najeeb's elders taught him to hold in his emotions, sheathing them like a weapon.

At the age of eighteen he abruptly left behind that world, despatched across the seas to a university in the United States. It was his father's idea, a vain stab at worldliness to impress a few haughty ministers in the government corridors of Islamabad. Najeeb went reluctantly, and for months he held himself sternly under wraps, bookish and brooding through a North Carolina winter amid airless dreams of the Khyber.

Then came the spring, and Najeeb emerged timidly from underground. He began sampling the bounty of bright new places that soon made home seem small, plain and crude. There were supermarkets as big as his village, libraries the size of canyons, lush trees alive with blossom and songbirds. Then there were the women, practically naked compared with the ones he'd grown up with. They were a temptation, he knew, yet there was a holiness about them, too - as if heaven and hell had been rolled into one amazing creation of bare arms, exposed legs and lustrous heads of hair, their animated faces open to the world and all its possibilities. They soon became responsible for an altogether new kind of training in Najeeb's life. Tell us your feelings, they demanded. Share your thoughts. Having been exposed to Shakespeare in the same heady spring, Najeeb found himself torn in ways he had never anticipated. To feel or not to feel, that was the question.

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And now, years after his homecoming, he was not only restless but trapped - banished from tribal lands by his father, barred from America by consular officials.

His father's action had followed a betrayal which Najeeb no longer cared to revisit. The consular ban was of a more recent vintage. The United States had decided the previous month that it no longer wanted his company, after his two worlds had collided in ways previously unimaginable in the burning skies of lower Manhattan.

So, he soldiered on in Peshawar, feeling as if he'd snagged a little of himself in each place he'd departed. And as each morning's peace dissolved he often found himself brooding over what was missing, sometimes believing that he, too, was disappearing into the Peshawar haze, as indistinct as the horizon. In a country where most people defined themselves by family or faith, Najeeb found himself resorting to a more American approach, seeking identity from his various occupations. For the moment, then, he was a translator and guide, a painter of birds, an unemployed computer engineer, and, most recently, a journalist of sorts, reporting for a rambling English-language daily called the Frontier Report.

The few people in Peshawar who knew Najeeb well could have added further labels - disowned son, enthusiastic fornicator, occasional imbiber of forbidden beverage, habitual consorter with foreigners - tireless seeker of any path, in other words, that might lead beyond Pakistan. And at this precarious moment in the city's history, when choosing sides was the order of the day, Najeeb remained dangerously neutral.

One thing no one ever called him was lazy, and today's schedule was particularly industrious. First on the agenda: a ride on his motor scooter to the humble offices of the Frontier Report, where as always there would be plenty to write about. His daily task was to fashion a digest of news briefs from the tribal hinterlands of the North-West Frontier Province. It always made for strange reading - rustic feuds and oddball robberies, villages convulsed over the tiniest of matters. Perhaps one day he would collect them in a volume of curios for his friends in the United States, a Pakistani gothic that would finally make them understand what made this place tick.

The most important business of the day was scheduled for late afternoon, when Najeeb would meet yet another foreign journalist who wanted to hire him for guiding and interpreting. A fixer, the job was called, and today's client was American.

With most of the journalists so far the routine had been pretty standard. They spent their first few days doing interviews in the streets, liking the lilt of the word 'bazaar' in their copy and enjoying the way every merchant invited them inside for tea. Najeeb translated while fending off hordes of curious barefoot boys and legless beggars.

If there happened to be a demonstration that day, they covered it, taking care to stay upwind from the tear gas. Then came the obligatory visit to a madrassah, one of the religious schools that supplied the Taliban with so many foot soldiers. Black-haired boys kneeling in straight lines on scrubbed marble floors, heads bobbing as they

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recited the Koran. Then perhaps a chant or two of 'Death to America!' before collecting quotes from the resident Holy Scholar.

Najeeb and his clients always shared an awkward laugh in the taxi afterwards, the reporter never quite sure where Najeeb stood on these matters, and Najeeb never eager to say, not when every cabby was a potential informant.

Then, unless there was some new wave of refugees to badger, Najeeb would escort his client east, three hours down the bouncing highway to the calm green sterility of Islamabad, to seek out bureaucrats and diplomats who might grant travel papers for the Afghan border. Afghanistan was the ultimate goal of every client, even if the border had been closed for weeks and was likely to stay that way a while longer.

If it ever opened, Najeeb would probably cross it as well. Not that he enjoyed gunfire. But at a pay rate of $150 a day he couldn't afford to say no, because the one thing that might yet get him out of this place was cash.

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